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Return of Economy Runs Could Help Gas Prices

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John Heitmann, a University of Dayton history professor and auto industry historian, has this message for car and oil companies: "Bring back the Economy Runs."

Oil companies and car manufacturers staged competitions called Economy Runs, mostly between 1936 and 1968, to improve technology and secure bragging rights. Everyday drivers put cars to the test on a variety of long-distance courses nationwide. The MobilGas Run was the best known, evolving into a coast-to-coast event, Heitmann said.

If companies held Economy Runs today, "the consumer would be the real winner," Heitmann said. "The results would show a top-to-bottom list in each vehicle class based on engine efficiency, performance and aerodynamics. One could make a very good buying decision based on this data. The running of a class or classes of hybrids would give us a clear indication of the advantages they do or do not have over conventional, internal gas-powered automobiles. And it might be an incentive to automotive engineers to come up with more fuel-efficient designs."

Heitmann presented his findings at the Society of Automotive Historians' 7th Biennial Conference of Automotive History, held in April in Nashville, Tenn. He will publish them in *Automotive History Review*.

"During the 1950s and 1960s, these annual competitions were the most publicized of all corporate promotions," Heitmann said. "The origins were modest. Rooted in local grass-roots events of the World War I era, the competitions celebrated the American ideals of utility and economy."

The competitions also celebrated success. Heitmann's research found pitchmen who proudly proclaimed, "I get more miles per gallon from Red Lion than any other gasoline." Studebaker bragged its car was "The Thrifty One in 1951." Car manufacturers began using the event in sales brochures; Dodge tooted its own horn with "Dodge Tops All 8's in 1953 MobilGas Economy Run."

"Competitors must have cringed when reading the last page of the brochure, in which nine other class participants were listed in order of finish," Heitmann said.

The results even showed heavier six- and eight-cylinder vehicles could achieve good gas mileage. A six-cylinder 1961 Ford Falcon had 32.68 mpg. An eight-cylinder 1938 Ford V-8 got 28.85 mpg.

"It is interesting to note, despite the widespread use of computers and aerodynamic design in modern automobiles along with lightweight materials that include plastics and aluminum, pre-WWII automobiles could hold their own in mile per gallon ratings compared to current models," Heitmann said.

Economy Runs started sputtering in the late 1960s. MobilGas lost ground in efficiency ratings and there were changes in engine pollution controls and shifts in corporate advertising strategy, according to Heitmann.

"I don't know if any oil company claims to market a gas that is more economical than the others," Heitmann added. "But if there is such a company, then they might be interested in picking up the torch."

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